

De(Fencing) with Youth: Moving from the Margins to the Center

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Abstract

Practices that combine the positive power of human relationships with art making can serve to De(fence): “create, innovate, reshape spaces, opportunities, or works that engage people or (and) bring us and them from the margins to the center” (JSTAE, call for papers, volume 32). In this paper, we explore ideas, techniques, and strategies used to implement four collaborative art projects with teenage youth. These projects aim to create a safe and generative context within which collaborative art-making practice can put youth and their ideas at the center of the process. Projects include an exploration of school climate utilizing sculpture in an urban high school art class, an intensive personal journey for orphans in Bulgaria using photography and travel, storytelling, and sculpture with girls in a locked detention setting, and an international service learning project with high school students using printmaking and quilting to benefit earthquake survivors in Haiti. We argue that the interdisciplinary and collaborative practices utilized create rich opportunities for learning and growth.

De(fencing) with Youth: Moving from the Margins to the Center

This issue of JSTAE asks us to consider the theme of De(fence). We respond by showing that practices that combine the positive power of human relationships with art-making can serve to De(fence): “create, innovate, reshape spaces, opportunities, or works that engage people or (and) bring us and them from the margins to the center (JSTAE, call for papers, volume 32). In this paper, we explore ideas, techniques, and strategies used to implement four collaborative art projects with teenage youth. The projects were created and implemented by one or both of the co-authors (Ann Tobey and Kate Jellinghaus) and aimed to create a safe and generative context within which collaborative art-making practice puts youth and their ideas at the center of the process. These examples reveal that much of the leverage to create opportunities for De(fencing) lies in our relationships with one another, in the reciprocity that happens in the “spaces-in-between” (Wilson-Mckay, 2009). When we are willing and able to connect with others as resources and partners in the spirit of exploring our common humanity, our sense of who we are and what is possible shifts as well.

A consideration of the meaning of the terms “margins” and “center” through the lens of interpersonal connectedness leads us to the universal human experiences of being valued and belonging. These social-emotional experiences are central to human identity and are created and mutually defined across infinite settings by the on-going reciprocal interactions between and among individuals, cultural sensibilities, institutional structures, and other environmental factors.¹ For an individual, a feeling that I am on the margins (regardless of the context of reference) implies that I am powerless, that I have little value, and/or that I don’t really belong. Alternately, a sense of being in the center arises from knowing that I belong, that I am valued, and that I have the power to transform myself and others. Engendering these feelings of value, belonging, and reciprocity is at the heart of work that aims to De(fence).

Those with a positive youth development focus have posited that youth are often undervalued and objectified at a great cost to their growth and to society (Delgado & Staples, 2008). Groups of teens are often seen as problems, and even among those who tend to see teens in a more positive light, there has been a tendency to think about them in terms of what they need, thereby positioning them as the recipients of services or teaching (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). More recently, young people are being acknowledged as powerful resources (Curtis, 2008; Delgado, 2006): they are makers, knowers, and teachers themselves – each with valuable ideas and abilities.

It is crucial for adults and youth to embrace a philosophy that transforms “young people from their traditional roles as consumers, victims, perpetrators and needy clients...” (Eccles & Gootman, 2002). To play a role in De(fencing) with youth, adults must take the next step and act on the premise that teens have something to offer -- that their ideas and voices have a place at the center. When young people are respected and involved in this way, they will know that they belong and that they have the power and responsibility to make a difference, that they can “be agents in their own personal and community development” (Wong, Zimmerman & Parker, 2010, p. 100).

¹ See Bronfenbrenner, 1979; 2004 for further discussion of bio-ecological/contextual systems theories of human development).

Art making projects with youth can be especially powerful opportunities for learning through participatory action. Youth can be actively involved throughout the process of reflection, conceptualization, critical thinking, and making. When the creative and generative process of art making is combined with a collaborative and supportive context, the opportunities for enrichment in the form of meaningful developmental experiences are heightened for all participants. In her essays on education, the arts and social change, Maxine Greene (1995) asserts, “imagination is what, above all, makes empathy possible” (p. 3). The social and artistic combine beautifully to create an expanded awareness of self and our reciprocal connections to others.

In addition, research now supports the notion that programs that combine youth development principles (see Lerner, Fisher & Weinberg, 2000) with culture and art in an effective way are powerful contributors to the healthy development of young people (Skillman Foundation, 2007; Eccles & Gootman, 2002). For instance, youth engagement in enriching projects leads to the development of intellectual and social skills and abilities, allowing youth to play an active role in the positive transformation of both themselves and their environments (Hetland, Winner, Veenema, Sheridan, & Perkins, 2007). And, although an in-depth discussion of the additional benefits of engaging youth in collaborative art-making is beyond the scope of this article, the developmental rewards of this practice have been documented elsewhere (see Cooper & Sjostrom, 2006; Harding, 2005; Sickler-Voigt, 2006).

In order to engage youth at the center of the project, adults must work to deconstruct the hierarchy that typically resides in relationships between youth and adults. Swanson (2009) warns us to beware of our complicity with the status quo as she describes the importance of fostering a “humbling togetherness” (p.13) and “listening collaboratively” (p.18), which allow us to be better attuned to opportunities for transformation and transcendence. It is up to adults to find the gate in the hierarchical “fence” and invite youth to access control and authorship of the project (Ivashkevich, 2012). Working collaboratively in a side-by-side relationship conveys to both youth and adults that youth belong, that they are valued and valuable. This is one way we can bring teens from the margins to the center -- by engaging them fully in the process.

As we strive to build art-making contexts that provide key ingredients such as generous support, safety, self-expression, and full participation, the adult role becomes increasingly multi-faceted. Adults must be flexible enough to both take charge and let go. It is this conscious and reflexive action of *stepping in* and *stepping back* that is essential for fostering a deep level of youth engagement, youth participation, and youth voice. When we step in, we are aware of the need to create a safe and enriching space, organize and plan, motivate, facilitate, mentor, teach, share knowledge, and share ourselves. Alternately, when we step back, we create openings for youth to step into these roles. We must make the leap of faith necessary to yield responsibility and control of the project to the youth. As youth become more trusted participants, their ownership of the project increases, thereby increasing the potential meaning and power that the experience holds (Andrews, 2010).

Case Studies

In the following four case examples, we nudged aside real and perceived barriers to create working relationships with peers and teens across institutional boundaries. Although these “interdisciplinary coalitions” (Buffington & Muth, 2011) were time consuming to create and

sustain, the benefits of working together maximized the impact of our efforts. When we combine a diversity of talents, skills, and backgrounds, we increase our ability to connect with the group and to bring valuable human and material resources to the project.

An overarching goal present in each of the projects was to create a generative context—a personal and artistic space in which rich experiences could be had, positive growth could happen, and relevant art could be made. In each case, adult mentors facilitated a collaborative youth art-making project with an intentional theme and a final product. Each project emphasized the importance of art-making skills, studio habits of mind (Hetland et al., 2007), strong artistic products, and public exhibition of the finished works. Each project also explored the importance of creating a safe social context for the art-making group, in which empowering attitudes and themes could facilitate a positive sense of connection and growth. With such a “secure base” (Bowlby, 1988) as a foundation, the projects were further designed to engage and empower youth. We asked youth to work together to critically reflect, analyze, and take creative risks as we actively elicited and listened to their ideas. We stepped back to make room for youth to take ownership of the concept and implementation of the projects and to ultimately experience the satisfaction of collective authorship and recognition.

Thoughtful use of themes adds another layer of relevance to a project’s capacity to De(fence). Although each project engages participants to explore themselves, their environments, and their relationships to others, the themes -- uncovering identity, sharing our stories, challenging the status quo, and connecting through service -- represent a continuum along an expanding sense of self-in-social-context. The students in the Alternative Doorways project explored their sense of belonging and value as they challenged the status quo within the context of their school system. Our Bulgarian youth explored the immediate realms of identity and personal relationship in their lives. For the girls in lock-up, the focus on belonging and mutuality was strongest through the sharing of personal stories in the group context. Finally, for students in the service-oriented Haiti Quilt-Making Project, the perspective broadened to include a sense of interconnectedness and reciprocity with others on a global level.

Case #1: Alternative Doorways Project: Challenging the Status Quo

In 2010, over 40 art students (ages 15-18) at Charlestown High School in Boston, Massachusetts envisioned alternatives to the metal detectors that they were required to walk through as they entered the school each morning. Kate Jellinghaus initiated the project, organizing student teams to design symbolic entryways that expressed how they would want to feel and others to feel as they passed into the school. Instrumental adult mentors included the Charlestown High art teacher, Maurice Lane, and several art education student volunteers. The project lasted six weeks and involved students building monumental sculptures out of recycled materials. These sculpted archways reflected the teens’ ideas about school, values, profanity, community, diversity, adversity, prayer, travel, and celebration – themes that they chose and developed themselves. At this large urban public school the “Alternative Doorways Project” challenged the status quo by offering participants a chance to critically analyze their surroundings, develop original and innovative ideas about school climate, and construct public art that expressed radically different alternatives to the existing entryway. As such, the project offers an example of social justice art education that is also based on a “pedagogy of possibility” (Desai & Chalmers, 2007).



Figure 1. Rise above the system.
Alternative Doorways Project, 2010.

The idea stemmed in part from a reaction to the particular atmosphere of the school building. New to the school, Kate was struck by the starkness of the school's 'brutalist'-like architecture with its lack of natural light, sterility of the foyer, heavy concrete cinder blocks, and lack of clear lines of sight. Metal detectors, in particular, expose the experiences that many of our American schoolchildren face regarding issues of security, safety, and protection. As such, the metal detector seemed an apt metaphor as a mandatory passageway into the school building. As a visual and sculptural form, the metal detector led to the idea of creating our own, "open" or "alternative" monumental doorways – something that might challenge the status quo and represent a qualitatively different type of entry into school.

The project began with students in art class sharing their thoughts and feelings about entering the school building each day, and, specifically, about passing through the metal detectors. Through discussions and writing exercises, students were invited to express their feelings and opinions about the metal

detectors and the general school climate (e.g., How do you feel about the metal detector that you walk through every day as you enter the school? What are the most important things that hold us together as a community?). Students were also urged to envision alternatives and to look critically at the school environment (e.g., What values would you want people to embrace when they walk in the school? If you could make a different kind of entryway/doorway, something that represented anything you wanted, what would it be? Why?).

Responses were varied. Students described the metal detectors as both "a necessity" and "an annoyance." They described feeling "uncomfortable," "embarrassed," "hating it," and like "a statistic." While one girl wrote, "I feel it's cool because I honestly feel someone would get killed if they didn't have them," another countered, "It makes me late and it's pointless because people still get things into the school." Students envisioned alternative doorways that represented concepts such as "serenity," "unity," and "respect," as well as alternative styles "heart-shaped" or "gold-plated and Victorian-looking."

This preliminary brainstorming served to set a context for our creative work on multiple levels. It gave the participating adults direct feedback from students about their thoughts on school and school climate. It created a safe space in which students were both challenged to begin thinking critically about their school environment and allowed to express their ideas.

It established the entryway/doorway of the school as a metaphor for the attitudes we carry with us into the school community. In this way, the early stages of student input helped construct those meaningful connections among people, materials, and ideas that would be necessary for the overall success of the project.

During the design and building stages of the project, certain activities were scaffolded and supported by adults more than others, depending on the needs of the students at each given juncture. We began thinking three-dimensionally by building small paper models. We then measured the metal detectors, discussed contemporary monumental art, such as Christo's Manhattan "Gates," and talked about how our 'gates' would each be symbolically different and unique. The young people then organized themselves into design teams and were given access to large quantities of materials from a local art-recycling center. Students were not given specific guidelines for using the materials, although they were given pragmatic support throughout the stages of building. They were responsible for establishing the final design, content, and meaning of their specific doorways.

In instances where things stalled, an adult would "step in." In one case, one of the design teams gave up and refused to move forward. Stepping in for the adult in this case meant talking to the students to see what the source of their frustration was. The students seemed to think that they would not be allowed to create a doorway that expressed the depth of their anger. Once heard, the students felt confident to continue. The art educator also saw this as an opportunity to invite them to make a visual connection between their feelings and the materials (colors, properties) they chose for their sculpture. Their final artwork incorporated trashcans, black duct tape, and neon paint, and was entitled "Rise Above the System Doorway."

Their artist statement read:

When we say "system," we mean the school system. We're frustrated that the system is not inspirational enough. There aren't enough extracurricular activities and kids aren't inspired to stay in school. There's not enough school



Figure 2. No profanity at school doorway. Alternative Doorways Project, 2010.

spirit and professionalism. So, when we say “rise above” the system, we mean we want to change things.

The finished doorways, along with the design teams’ artist statements, stood in the foyer of the school, forming an open tunnel that all students and staff could pass through as they entered the building. They were later exhibited in the Arnheim gallery in Boston. In addition to the sculpting and teamwork skills developed, the value of this project lay in its challenges to the status quo. It asked students to look at their local environment in relation to themselves, to think critically about their surroundings, and to offer their own alternatives to the existing ones. However, it also provided adult educators the opportunity to learn from their students and to become flexible mentors. This type of critical and reflective thinking, reciprocity, and creative adaptation are important skills for both young and adult artists alike.

Case #2: Bulgarian Photo Project: Uncovering Identity

In this project eight young people (aged 16-21) from a state-run orphanage in Bulgaria each created their own photographic series on the subject of personal identity. With the help of adult volunteers from Bulgaria and the United States, over a two month period in 2007, young participants chronicled their lives and the relationships important to them.

The project built upon previously established relationships between the young people and their adult mentors. It was our intention to provide an opportunity for them to develop their self-confidence, self-understanding, sense of belonging, and critical thinking skills as they transitioned to adulthood and independent life beyond the orphanage. In addition, children from the orphanages were often depicted as victims and objectified by the media in one-dimensional ways that highlighted the horrendous conditions of their lives. By using photography to express their reality as they saw it, the young people had the potential to change their perceptions of themselves as well as the preconceptions of wider audiences.

The idea for this project was the result of an interdisciplinary collaboration between Kate Jellinghaus in the role of teaching artist, and art therapist Dr. Alexandra Ivanova. The work was supported by a CEC Artslink grant. The youth participants were chosen based on their need, availability, and interest. Seven were ethnic Roma Bulgarians and one was of Vietnamese background. All the young participants had been together in the state-run orphanage in the town of Ugarchin from approximately age six. The adult volunteers were social workers and artists who had developed relationships with the children over the course of almost a decade of working on various projects organized through a loose network of church and community groups that marked a new flourishing of civil society in post-communist Bulgaria.

The conditions at the orphanage, called the “Home for Children Without Parental-Raising – Zdravets,” were extremely dire during the years the young people were growing up, years marked by widespread poverty and hardship for Bulgarian society as a whole. In a series of autobiographical interviews conducted by Kate Jellinghaus in 2008, the youth participants in the Photo Project described their memories of life growing up. Ngyuen Thi Chung, remembered the Zdravets orphanage as “A wreck. People were living like animals – there were broken windows; everything was broken...Children were always insulting each other and the staff” (personal communication, August, 2008) A boy, Naiden Iliev, stated: “I was shocked when I first went to Ugarchin. There was little order or discipline...The kids beat –

no everyone beat each other up -- both kids and adults” (personal communication, August, 2008).

The desperation of these conditions compelled the adult volunteers to reach out to the children at this orphanage, and over time relationships of trust and friendship developed between them. As young Sasho Hristov recalled: “I was astonished that the attitude of our visitors from Sofia was so much more personal and direct than what I had experienced before – as if these people were my older siblings– they were very friendly and curious about us” (personal communication, August, 2008).

Because the adults had laid the groundwork of building trust, this group became a safe place for the youth to experience creative freedom and explore their lives. An initial weekend retreat was arranged to build a cohesive group and provide technical training in photography. After a picnic and art activities that encouraged mutual sharing and visual thinking, we divided into teams for a competition: Youth participants had 2 hours to take pictures around the city of Samokov and we reconvened later to view and judge the work. The theme was: “Who can take the most comic picture and the most tragic picture?”

During this exercise the youth took pictures randomly, of anything and everything, but upon looking at the work as a group, most of them concluded that the results were “boring” with “too many babies and small animals” and that “it’s not easy to take a good photograph.” This led to a conversation about “what makes a good photograph,” and suddenly the task ahead, of creating a strong photographic series, seemed more challenging and less straightforward. The young artist/participants were developing a critical stance!

At this point, the group split up into pairs—each youth with an adult mentor. Mentors helped their youth participants articulate answers to the questions: “If you could document what’s important to you with the camera, looking out at the world, what would you shoot, and why?” “If you could go anywhere in the country, and photograph anything or anyone, what would it be, and why?” The adult role was to be flexible and to support the youths’ creative inquiry, wherever it led them. Mentors helped their partners to develop a theme, while also encouraging the youth to be open to the recording of spontaneous moments and experiences along the way. This combination of guidance and open-ended structure allowed the creative ideas of the youth participants to emerge and to develop in complexity over time.

As the project evolved, the participants were not simply snapping pictures anymore -- they were grappling with meaning, including relationships with significant people and places. In the process they were developing their own sense of personhood, identity, and belonging. Photographer Ivaila Angelova’s work (age 16) involved intensely personal portraits of both the young children playing at her old orphanage and older people who took care of her when she was little. Many of her photographs also explored physical movement. She talked about the role of movement in her series as follows: “As a kid, I loved to teach the younger children how to break dance. I loved playing with the younger kids and break dancing came to me from within: It has a fast rhythm and movement and creates the overall feeling of a party” (personal communication, August, 2008).



Figure 3. Photos by Ivaila Angelova. Bulgarian photo project, 2007.

The intimate process of self-discovery combined with the public exhibition of the photographs was empowering for everyone involved. The culminating event of the project was the exhibit at the Ministry of Culture Gallery “Sredets” in Sofia, where many of the photographs were purchased by members of the Bulgarian parliament. Exhibiting allowed the public to see the world through the eyes of the youth and to learn more about their lives in Bulgaria. All of the participants commented on how exciting it was to see their work in a prestigious gallery and to see their photographs being sold. As Naiden (age 20) said: “I was happy to be interviewed by Bulgarian National Radio and I also spoke at the opening of the exhibit. It was interesting to see what pictures were bought and sold. We felt famous! I’m very happy about it” (personal communication, August, 2008).

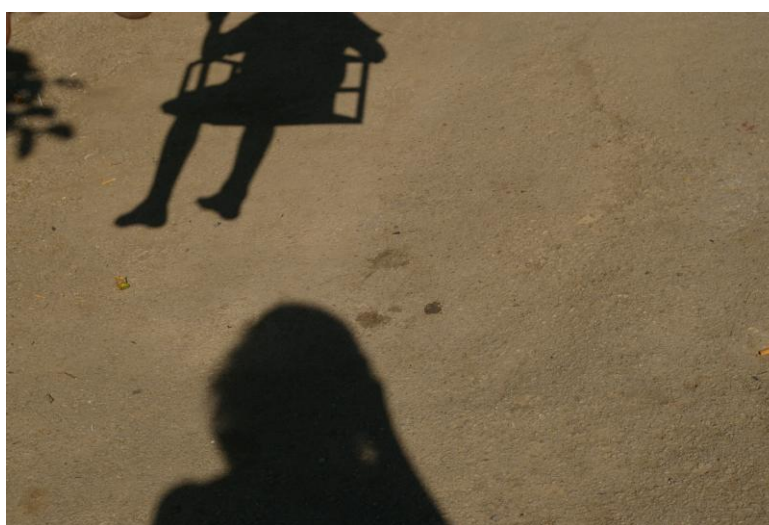


Figure 4. Photos by Ivaila Angelova. Bulgarian photo project, 2007.

Case #3: Memory Vessels Project: Sharing Our Stories

In 2010, 15 girls, aged 13-17, in a locked female juvenile detention setting in Boston, MA, worked together over 9 weekly sessions to create “memory vessels”-- sculpted bowl-shaped containers made from papier-mache, each of which held an idea or the essence of a girl’s story. The completed vessels were held by small figures made from plaster strips and wire, which offered up the girls’ stories and memories.

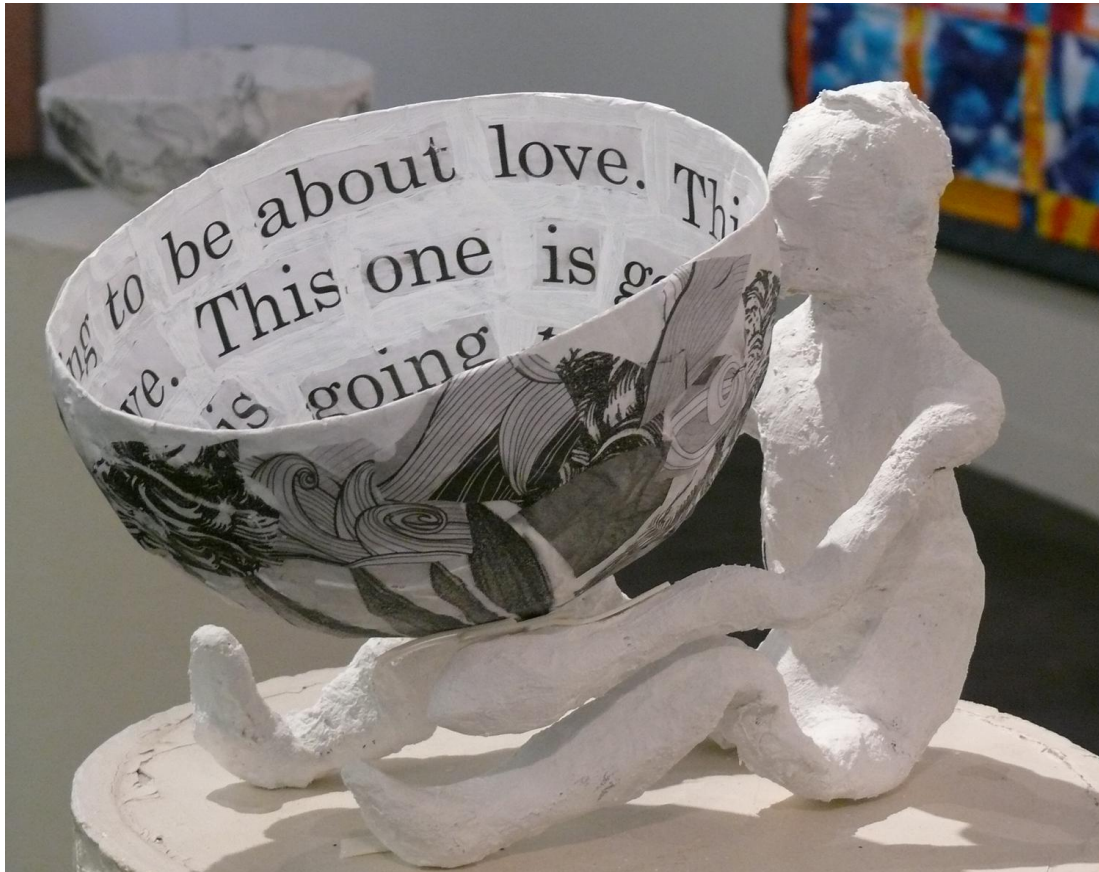


Figure 5. This one is going to be about love. Artistic Noise collaboration, 2010.

The Memory Vessels project aimed to give voice to the stories of incarcerated girls by fostering an atmosphere of shared experience through storytelling, listening, recording, reflecting, creating, and exhibiting. Inspired in part by the independent non-profit StoryCorps, the project created a safe forum within which girls in juvenile lock-up could share personal stories as a way to “strengthen and build the connections between people, teach the value of listening, and weave into the fabric of our culture the understanding that every life matters” (www.storycorps.org). For young people who have had traumatic experiences or who have trouble verbalizing difficult feelings or ideas, the arts may provide another avenue for communication, one that is powerful, direct, and immediate. Padgham (2007) describes the significant healing power in the process of group art-making with detained women and children. Furthermore, in the creative process there exists an element of play that can serve as a catalyst for positive feelings, often enhancing young peoples’ willingness to learn and lightening the load for girls in lock-up who face daunting hurdles.

This project was supported by Artistic Noise (www.artisticnoise.org), a non-profit arts program for youth in the juvenile justice system. Kate Jellinghaus served as lead artist for the project along with a young-adult staff mentor, Minotte Romulus, who had first come in contact with Artistic Noise as a teen in lock-up. Minotte's presence as an adult collaborator helped create a sense of safety for the girls and connected them to the project in many ways. The project was implemented and exhibited in collaboration with Ann Tobey's college-based initiative, Ubuntu Arts (www.wheelock.edu/ubuntuarts), including ongoing support and facilitation by undergraduate student, Sarah Albrecht.

The project began with trust building and concept building activities, and we then divided into pairs and set up a fun "story-telling competition" which included prizes. The girls came up with the following categories: "The best love story," "The saddest story," "The funniest story," and "The most accident prone story." For the story-telling, each person held the digital recorder, while the others listened as we shared deeply personal stories – about a disappointment in love, a difficult relationship, a favorite dog, a bad day with a series of mishaps. Individuals listened to each other, laughed together, and responded thoughtfully to the stories, as people do among friends. Each of the adults also participated in the group storytelling. This participation was an important act that served to flatten the hierarchy within the group, in that all members experienced the same level of vulnerability that sharing something personal demands. In addition, we have observed that sound-based mediums are received enthusiastically by teens who may feel intimidated by certain drawing, painting, or sculpting processes, and therefore these mediums can provide a more effective way to reach personal content and meaning during the initial stages of a visual project.



Figure 6. Memory vessel project, Artistic Noise, 2010

Sarah facilitated a group discussion about Ubuntu by using quotes and asking the girls to find connections between Ubuntu and their stories. Archbishop Desmond Tutu of South Africa has described Ubuntu as a term that represents a central feature of the African worldview, the meaning of which is loosely translated in the saying “A person is a person through other persons” (Tutu, 1999, p. 31). Exploring Ubuntu was a very powerful experience, as the girls began to expand their perspectives and find new meaning in even the most tragic of stories. Davia (age 16) said: “Ubuntu is a strong word. To me it seems like togetherness – like say me being locked up, my family stays by my side, like we’re in it together” (personal communication, February 7, 2010). The group then edited the stories, listening together to find the narrative essences for use in their sculptures. We all wrote down what we thought was the “gem” of the story – the crucial moment. These textual story “essences” were incorporated into the interior design of the sculpted vessels. In this way, the final product was as much about listening, mutual validation and respect as it was about artistic output.

While most of the youth could not be released from the locked detention setting to see their work exhibited, it clearly mattered to them that their artwork would be seen by others. Collaborating with additional partners to find new venues to exhibit the works extended the reach of the girls’ stories. The Memory Vessels have been exhibited numerous times at galleries and public venues, and those viewing the artwork often express surprise that incarcerated girls created such meaningful and stunning pieces. When the public has the opportunity to develop more positive impressions of this population, and when the girls receive this feedback, they move a little closer to the center.

Case Study #4:

Haiti Print and Quilt Project: Connecting Through Service

In 2010, Kate Jellinghaus led a project with art teacher Maurice Lane and over 60 art students from Charlestown High School, in which students, staff and community volunteers, including co-author Ann Tobey, worked together to make two elaborate quilts to sell in order to raise money for artists and their families working at a collective in Port Au Prince, Haiti devastated by the 2009 earthquake. The artwork from this collective had initially inspired the students’ print designs, which were later used in the quilts. In this way, there was a direct artistic reciprocity between the student artists in Charlestown and the artisan collective in Haiti.

This collaborative and service-oriented art project was intended to show collective support of the 50+ Haitian-American students at the Charlestown High School and of those suffering in Haiti. In addition, it provided a means for youth to become personally involved and develop connection to others by responding meaningfully to this crisis. The finished quilts were displayed in several public galleries and venues and were sold for \$1500 each. The money was sent directly to the Haitian artists along with a video letter from the students.



Figure 7. The Haiti Print and Quilt Project, 2010.

The project began as part of a required unit on printmaking in which students were asked to cut linoleum block designs inspired by the images found at the online site of the Haitian art collective (www.haitimetalart.com). The second phase of the project was voluntary, and students understood that by choosing to participate further they would be devoting many hours of their time and energy to make artwork that would not receive course credit and would not remain theirs. Students who chose to participate in the quilt-making phase of the project printed their linoleum cuts onto squares of fabric and then embellished their designs with embroidery and beads, which were then assembled into quilts by teachers working with Ann Tobey.



Figure 8. The Haiti Print and Quilt Project, 2010.

When we first began the project, we invited Josette Teneus, the school's Haitian-American guidance counselor to lead a discussion on the situation in Haiti. Although many students seemed uncomfortable and chose not to engage in this discussion, through the course of the art-making process many of the same students became enthusiastic participants. For example, even though the quilt-making portion of the project was voluntary, there was almost 100% participation, and students, boys and girls, often stayed after school and asked to take the embroidery home to continue their work.

Students voiced their feelings of accomplishment in a final video letter (translated into Haitian Creole) that was made by the group to greet the Haitian artists, show them the quilts, and explain the project. Students addressed the Haitian artists in a very direct, supportive, and emotional way, an attitude that had not been apparent in the early stages of the project. Students expressed sentiments such as, "I give my condolences out to all the people who got lost in the tragedy in the earthquake." "I would like to wish everybody that you guys are not alone, we are here to help." One student, Levie Fernandes, said, "I worked on this project a lot and I enjoyed doing the beadings a lot. I hope that this project – the quilt and the money – helps people to rebuild their studio faster" (personal communication, May, 26, 2010).

The students were very pleased that their work was exhibited, and they took great pride in the high price paid for their artwork. It was also touching that both buyers went on to give the quilts as gifts to others; one recipient was a surgeon who had made repeated trips to Haiti after the earthquake. We later learned that many of the Haitian artists had chosen to use the money to help their children cover their school expenses. These poignant facts furthered the sense of purpose and connection engendered through the project.

This service-oriented project demonstrated how collaborative art practice can foster a sense of empowerment within a group as well as a sense of connection and mutuality across groups. The project was initially offered to students in art class but soon brought in students and staff from throughout the school. Teachers came by to donate fabric, a sewing machine, and an extra pair of hands. One proverb stitched on the border of the quilt captures this community-wide effort, "*Men anpril chay pa lou: Many hands make the load lighter.*" Often young people in our cities are labeled "at risk" and seen as the recipients of charity. Opportunities to give of themselves and to engage in service to others are rewarding and fulfilling and create contexts where young people move from the margins to the center, as individuals who have something to offer society.

Conclusion

The process of De(fencing) requires us to temporarily or permanently "take away fences, walls, imposed boundaries" (call for papers, JSTAE, volume 32,). We have proposed that when we reach across socially constructed fences to engage with others, we are, in essence, engaging in a process of De(fencing).

In developing art projects with youth, we seek to leverage the potential of relationships to create opportunities for reciprocal learning and growth. These interdisciplinary and collaborative practices challenge the status quo by creating new contexts, meanings, and experiences. Meaningful collaboration often involves re-examining our own attitudes and perspectives about traditional roles so that we may work to reverse oppressive

relationships. A willingness to be self-aware and to shift perspective is essential when creating empowering contexts with youth.

The process of making art is particularly suited to imagining possibilities and generating creative solutions to social problems. The arts inherently broaden our understanding of ourselves – our sense of identity and belonging – by placing a value on people, context, and history. Projects like these can provide opportunities for our youth to become conscious of both their inner experience and their value in a democratic society (Gude, 2009). When thoughtfully conceptualized and accomplished, the benefits reach much further than the initial circle of intended recipients. This approach to art education places young people squarely in the center of the creative process, engaging them in opportunities to become critical thinkers and problem-solvers – as artists and agents of change.

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